

EVA KESSLOVÁ

& THE BERG ORCHESTRA: OFFERING AN EXPERIENCE

The Berg Orchestra is an exceptional phenomenon on the Czech contemporary music scene. Founded almost a quarter of a century ago, it has become the most established yet independent organisation on the scene. It presents contemporary music in combination with other art forms, in inventive programming in site-specific locations, as well as through small happenings, events, and initiatives – including a new music coffee machine. The level of the orchestra has risen steadily over the years, due in no small part to the tireless work of its director and manager: Eva Kesslová.

How did you encounter music? And what about managing and organising?

I had music lessons, like many other children, and because I liked playing the violin and I was quite good at it, I managed to convince my parents that I should go to a conservatory. This was no great excitement for my dad – I was good at other things too, and he thought it would be better if I did anything but. Later, I had problems with my spine which ultimately led me to consider another career. When a friend was applying to study management at the music faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (HAMU), I decided to try it too and took the entrance exam. And already in my first year of study, I started helping out organising Berg concerts – I was a violinist with the orchestra at the time. It was probably also partly the case that those who started the orchestra were happy to get the administrative duties off their hands. But perhaps my first experience organising was the graduation ball at the conservatory – someone had to do it, but I have no idea how it came to be me. I vaguely remember not enjoying the ball – there was always something to organise.



How did Berg start?

It was a student initiative at first, supported to a large degree by HAMU and professor Václav Riedlbauch, who at the time worked there as director of artistic production. He engaged Berg in the composition department concerts and various festivals then active at HAMU. The school had no orchestra of its own, and we partially filled this gap. For some time, we had no identity - we operated under the school. We later became a non-profit organisation.

The first concert took place in 1995, but we number the seasons from 2001 - the first year we put together a thought-out concert plan for an entire year. We played a mix of older music, 20th century music, and the now - in addition to living composers of the middle and older generations, we also rehearsed new works by composition students. We later naturally stuck with those. Some of the first composers we worked with included Petr Wajsar, Slavomír Hořínka, Jana Vöröšová, Michal Nejtěk, or Ondřej Štochl, with whom we continue collaborating - in some form or

other - to this day. The concerts were also purely concerts - we only later started combining music with dance, theatre, silent films, or the visual arts later.

Where did the name come from? Is it from Alban Berg?

I wasn't at the naming meeting. Legend says that the founders and Václav Riedlbauch were trying to come up with a title quickly. The aim was to avoid the usual clichés and suggest a focus on 20th century music. Alban Berg was suggested, but it all happened very fast and there was no time to acquire permission. So the decision was made to call it Berg - and if necessary, we'd say that HAMU is on a small hill. We have a mountain as our logo, and on a symbolic level, it signifies our attempt to always climb higher.

What's changed since then?

A lot. Back then, Berg functioned thanks to enthusiasts on all sides, the musicians received only symbolic fees, the management got nothing - almost everyone was a student, so it wasn't a problem for anyone. Audiences were composed mostly of friends and relatives. We gradually stood up on our own feet and professionalised. It is no longer just friends at our concerts - though of course, they still come. The repertoire changed too, from a combination of old and new music to a clear focus on the musical present. Thanks to that, our musicians have grown, as has our audience. Today, we can really play anything - the musicians will have no problem learning the music and our audience is open enough to manage almost anything we throw at them. I suppose it was important that we were never really scared of anything. And even with small budgets, we made incredible things. The Berg Orchestra, for example, was the first ensemble to present their own original scenic version of Heiner Goebbels' *Schwarz auf Weiss (Black on White)*. Unfortunately, our - still small - budgets mean we often only do a few performances, as we cannot spend more time on taking more demanding projects elsewhere. For Czech promoters, we're extremely expensive, and those abroad don't know us.

Can you trace a moment of "dramaturgical realisation"? Was the change from a mix of older and newer music sudden, or gradual?

We present a new piece by a living Czech composer at almost every Berg Orchestra concert - that's been true since the beginning. We have premiered over a hundred pieces, some of them evening-length. We gradually abandoned everything except the music of the 20th century and the present. Today, we rarely play music by dead composers. It is certainly not without interest that the Berg Orchestra performed virtually all of Martinů's music for chamber orchestra, and this at a time when Martinů was certainly not as popular as he is today. After all, we owe our existence to the Bohuslav Martinů Foundation, who supported us generously at the outset.

You attended musical management courses in the US. To what extent are these experiences transferrable to our part of the world?

I had a year-long fellowship at New York University thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship. I originally planned to spend an extra year there, which would have been possible thanks a fellowship from the American Orchestra League, but I had the wrong kind of visa. So I came back home and tried to apply my American experiences here. I was also extremely lucky to be selected to take part in the first year of the Kennedy Center International Summer Fellowship Program. For three years, I went to Washington every summer, drawing inspiration for further work.

As for applying American experiences to our own reality – at the very least, you can extend the maximal amount of courtesy to your subscribers. That was always a rule of ours. It certainly also impacted our marketing strategies – when we were starting out, contemporary music was generally viewed very negatively. We wanted to change that. We had to lure in potential listeners and then not disappoint them when they did come. We tried to avoid academicism in advertising and programme notes. It was important to clarify that we were offering first and foremost an *experience* of contemporary music. So we did all we could to make the evening an event, often offering accompanying programme before the concert, such as guided tours around the concert space or its surroundings. This had another positive effective – a considerable portion of the audience did not arrive from work at the last minute, but were instead in a good mood and ready to listen to new music – music that demands a lot more from the listener than just concentration.

Where do you recruit your musicians? Has the situation changed in relation to how long they stay in the orchestra?

The musicians need a high level of proficiency, but they also need to be as open as possible to everything new. We have a stable member base which has to regenerate – we cannot provide our musicians with their main income. Many of our members, however, have been with us for a long time – some as long as ten or fifteen years. The Berg Orchestra is a permanent complement to their activities, they grew up with us, and today, they can play most anything. It is certainly worth mentioning that for many years, we were the only orchestra systematically applying itself to contemporary music. Many musicians thus passed through our “training”, and today they are members of leading Czech orchestras. Their positive approach to contemporary music is helping slowly change the atmosphere.

Today, Berg seems a typical new music ensemble – solo strings, winds, and brass. Was it once a full chamber orchestra?

We had to move from a chamber orchestra to a large ensemble form simply because contemporary composers do not write for the traditional chamber orchestra. These orchestras barely exist, and if they do, they rarely commission new music. We had to adapt to the repertoire on offer.

How do you select which composers you want to engage in longer collaborations?

We return to those we find interesting. Peter Vrábek (Berg's conductor and artistic director) is of the opinion that technical perfection is not enough – there are many such pieces today. The music also has to work on an emotional level – one has to feel the composer's personality and whether they have something to say. We search for the newest music but we're not restricted to a particular aesthetic; we want to be open to everything of high quality. That's a great advantage.

Which institutions or organisations are important for Berg?

Every partner is important and enriches us differently. You'll find large institutions among them, like the National Theatre, or large festivals like the Prague Spring or Strings of Autumn, who gave us the opportunity to produce a new version of Goebbels' *Schwarz auf Weiss*. For a number of years, we presented silent films with newly composed music together with the Jewish Museum in Prague. Then there are a number of small partners whom we work with in order to achieve more together; this often leads to interdisciplinary projects. But the music school we rehearse at is also important, as are all the institutions that support us financially.

How does your subscribers programme work? What do you offer your audience that the usual orchestras don't?

The first time we decided to offer season tickets, in 2004, we had around fifteen subscribers. Today, there are about a hundred. These are people who belong "in the family", which I think is a pleasant feeling on both sides. That we can programme the wildest contemporary music and nobody will bat an eyelid is determined to a large degree by the fact that many of our listeners have been with us for a number of seasons – some for over fifteen years.

The loyalty of Berg's audience is truly remarkable – I've noticed that people come to your concerts who don't otherwise attend contemporary music events. Your capacity to create and maintain "returning customers" is admirable.

Our audiences are formed of curious people who often attend a variety of cultural events. It's fantastic that – perhaps also thanks to us – they integrated contemporary music into their world. I think that our listeners' endurance is also due to the fact that we try to offer a variety of experiences of contemporary music – to search and surprise. In addition to combinations with other art forms, we also experiment with new concert forms. The aim is to disrupt the petrified rituals of the 19th century that are simply not "in tune" with the present. Sometimes this means entire composed evenings or formats such as "Hearing 2x", when a single piece is repeated, sometimes it's enough that the conductor says a few words about how a sampler works, followed by a practical demonstration.

To what extent do you search for support in the private sector? Are you able to find benefactors? How is this field developing in the Czech Republic?



PHOTO: PAVEL HEJNY

Peter Vrábel conducting the Berg Orchestra

We have a donor's club, and a patron might support the performance of a specific new piece. When I came back from the US in 2006, practically no cultural organisation had donors. Today, it has become the norm, but of course public funds are still central for the financing. This has its advantages too - it allows us to be more courageous in our search.

Berg often entices its listeners with promise of music in non-traditional spaces. How are you coping with the challenge of avoiding “gimmicks” and really finding a site-specific programme for every concert; one with its own meaning in that particular space? Do you not feel that the more established and popular, the less these events are needed and the audience is more ready to return repeatedly to more standard concert spaces?

We were among the first to search for non-traditional spaces. We discovered that contemporary music sounded better in industrial ruins than in beautiful “golden” halls. And with our budgets, the ruins were more readily available than the halls. This brought a number of complications. But also many opportunities - the space inspires you to create an original programme; forces you to think differently. We like these challenges, but the reality is that there are fewer and fewer of these

non-traditional spaces – there is a lot of construction in Prague. We can't just fit in anywhere; we need a lot of space for us and our audience, which is what forces us back to the concert halls.

Do you see this negatively? Perhaps when music is in a concert hall, it is not so much an “event”, it's just a concert and it's more about the music itself, not the picturesque set pieces of abandoned factories and unfinished underground stations.

I don't understand why someone feels that music is best in a traditional concert hall. We all know that even the Smetana Hall has a number of acoustic weak spots. Today, when composers often demand a fully mic'd up ensemble, traditional acoustic halls are no great advantage. The only thing is you don't have to move everything there (including chairs), so you have a lot less trouble.

Our basic tenet was always to find an ideal symbiosis of space and programming. If we need a hall with a long reverberation time, for example, and a church is inappropriate for whatever reason, it's best to fish in completely different waters – that's how we ended up performing in the beautiful constructivist palace that is the monumental entrance hall of the old Electrical Company Building near Vltavská in Prague, which goes up seven floors.

Your newest project is called “Music for Sirens”.

It's a complement to our “large” subscription series. Every first Wednesday of the month at noon, sirens ring out across the Czech Republic for almost three minutes. It is simply a test of their operability, but it has become something of an event over the years. And after years of dreaming, we're finally putting on this series of micro-concerts – we approached almost twenty Czech composers to write short chamber pieces that would use the siren test as a musical instrument. The aim is to get contemporary music to those who would not come for the evening concert – to offer them a taste of what we do. The concert will take place at various universities or in collaboration with institutions such as the Academy of Sciences, the National Library, and others. Thanks to our partnership with Czech Radio, who decided to broadcast our concerts live, it has become literally a dream project. Contemporary music will suddenly get to a huge number of people – at noon on a work day. It's playful, just like we like it!

Eva Kesslová (Prague, Czech Republic)

works as managing director of the Berg Orchestra, who specialise in presenting contemporary and 20th century music, often in combination with dance, theatre, or visual arts and at unusual venues (subway stations under construction, an old sewage plant, or a modern art museum). It regularly commissions new works with young Czech composers and presents important works by internationally acclaimed composers in Czech premieres. Kesslová studied performing arts administration in Prague, Dartington (GB), and New York (NYU, with the help of a Fulbright Scholarship). She was a Kennedy Center International Fellow and an ISPA Fellow. At the Berg Orchestra, she enjoys challenging people's image of contemporary music, aiming for a creative approach in presenting new music and managing the arts.